



RARE BREED

Saved by Woodlands Trust, O'Neil Farm's a working farm, learning lab



Amelia Curral, 13, of Duxbury, feeding the young calves, and Elise McAllister, 13, of Kingston are part of a 4-H group learning farming techniques at the O'Neil Farm.

By SUE SCHEIBLE
The Patriot Ledger

When traveling down the long dirt driveway to the O'Neil farm in Duxbury, a visitor can view the 20th century on one side and the 21st on the other.

On the left, 17 cows graze in the fields surrounded by woods, a small stream and blazing red swamp maples bordered by a low stone wall. On the right, houses built on another former farm give it the look of a suburban neighborhood.

"There aren't any other farms like this around anymore," said Marilyn Chadwick, who grew up in Duxbury and runs the Farmtastic 4-H at the O'Neil property.

"Without it, these kids would never have this opportunity."

Last December, Woodlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts completed the purchase of the 146-acre farm, saving it

The O'Neil Farm

- In operation since 1729
- 146 acres
- 70 dairy cows: Holstein, Guernsey, Jersey, milking shorthorn
- 3,000 pounds of milk sold every other day to Agri-Mark farmers cooperative in Franklin
- Home base for Farmtastic 4-H Club with 15 members, ages 10-16

ONE MAN'S LEGACY



Carl O'Neill is framed by a fruit-bearing pear tree as he leaves his shed on the family farm.

GARY HIGGINS photos/The Patriot Ledger



■ Carl O'Neil, a former Duxbury fire chief, in his tractor after mowing a neighbor's field.

Sale of O'Neil Farm

■ Price: \$4.3 million, which includes a \$1 million endowment for Historic O'Neil Farm, a new charitable corporation

■ Estimated value of land: \$6 million to \$8 million

■ Size: 146 acres in two parcels

from likely development. The \$4.3 million deal, some 10 years in the making, fulfilled the longtime dream of Carl O'Neil, 70, who lives on the farm and had owned it with his late brother and sister.

"Where I didn't have any children, I had an interest in preserving it," he said. O'Neil is a former Duxbury fire chief and civil defense director.

The property has been in the O'Neil family for more than 200 years. The sale created a new charitable corporation, Historic O'Neil Farm, with a \$1 million endowment and the condition that it be used in part for educational purposes. O'Neil, president of the corporation, was thus able to keep it as a working dairy farm.

"I have been a dairy farmer all my life, and I always really loved the woods and the wild life," he said.

On Saturday, the 4-H club was busy cleaning out the calves' pens and doing other chores. While O'Neil still works the land, mowing and laying, he now supervises a dairy staff of three, including 25-year-old Terri Thibodeau of Middleboro and also works with the 4-H helpers.

"Mr. O'Neil was the first one to teach me how to walk a cow for showing - you have a cow for showing - you have a leather halter and you walk backwards," said Elise McAllister, 13, of Kingston. "And he's teaching me so I can work there someday."

Elise recently decided to go to Bristol County Agricultural High School in Dighton next year.

McAllister and Amanda Curral, also 13, of Duxbury, have learned how to help Thibodeau with the



■ Terri N. Thibodeau of Plymouth, who teaches farming techniques to a 4-H group, prepares stainless steel tanks for the milking process.

skills even though vacations are few.

"It's a way of life," said O'Neil, describing what he sees as an essential part of the New England character and Duxbury's cultural heritage.

At this year's Marshfield Fair,

O'Neil cows and Farmtastic 4Hers won several awards, including best of breed, best of show, and showmanship and "gentle hands."

The sale established the farm as an educational destination, so O'Neil and Mark Primack, director of the Wildlands Trust, are planning public access and walking trails. Two Eagle Scouts are working this week on the

Dwindling dairy farms

■ Licensed dairy farms in Massachusetts:

1985: 688

2001: 262

2006: 191

Source: Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources



■ Amanda Curral, 13, of Duxbury makes friends with a 12-day-old calf.

7 Sources of purchase money: \$1.5 million from town of Duxbury community preservation funds; \$600,000 in other state grants; \$2 million in private donations; \$250,000 from the endowment of Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts in Duxbury; \$150,000 absorbed by other Wildlands Trust programs.

"I learn a lot, and I get to hang out with the cows and know their different personalities," Amanda said. "My parents like me to do it because it keeps me out of the house, and I don't get into trouble."

Her father, Steve Curral, 51, agreed. "This is a great alternative to all the typical things kids do, like sports, which Amanda isn't that interested in, and it is something that is kind of disappearing," Curral said. "She loves it and is learning quite a bit."

Thibodeau began working full time on the farm at age 18, right out of agricultural high school. She works from 6:30 to 10 a.m. daily, then takes a break and returns around 3 p.m. to do the afternoon milking.

"It's awesome—it's very unique," Thibodeau said. She takes pride in teaching the next generation farm

techniques, which include milking. Primack said. Those trails will open in the spring.

"There is another area that is just beautiful, with woods, open fields and a lot of wildlife," Primack said.

"Nesting hawks, a large flock of turkeys, deer. That trail is a year away."

For Chadwick, who grew up in Duxbury near Chandler farm, the O'Neil farm has a special meaning.

"In the summer, you have white Queen Anne's lace in the fields and blue chicory lines the driveway," she said. "In the fall, the swamp maples have that fiery red. At dusk, wild turkeys, which walk around during the day, fly up into the trees to roost in the woods. It's incredibly beautiful."

"That's Carl O'Neil's legacy."

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